

# THE BIG BLOWUP'S IMPACT ON AN IDAHO TOWN\*

Ron Roizen and Jim See

*In 1910, the Idaho mining town of Wallace was served by a weekly newspaper called The Wallace Miner. Its motto: "Devoted to the best interests of the entire Coeur d'Alene district, giving only authentic information and aiming to accomplish this without fear or favor."*

*On August 25, the paper's front-page story announced, in big, bold letters, that **"FIFTY LOSE LIVES IN FOREST FIRES THROUGH DISTRICT."** The actual number killed in the fires now known as the Big Blowup, which had hit the Northern Rockies 5 days earlier, would later prove closer to 90.*

*The story placed the number of men in Ed Pulaski's crew who survived the night in the Nicholson Mine at 31, a figure later revised to 39. Despite such problems, The Miner offered a gripping and detailed account of the fire's encounter with Wallace, reprinted below.*

## Town Seemed Doomed

For weeks the forests in every direction have been burning, and it was known that only a heavy fall of rain would ultimately put them out. With a high and fitful wind Saturday afternoon and evening, the flames headed for the south toward Wallace, and for a time the entire town seemed doomed. Arrangements were quickly made to get the women and children to places of safety. The railroad companies assembled their locomotives and rolling stock preparatory to caring for everyone. Nestled in the heart of high surrounding hills, with egress limited to a narrow canyon, it was realized that it might become necessary for all to flee, as a general conflagration would mean certain death for any who remained.

As the flames neared town on the southwest, they followed the hillside on the south, and for a time it looked as if the town might escape.

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\* The article first appeared in the *Shoshone News-Press* on October 23, 2004.

Nestled in the heart of high surrounding hills, with egress limited to a narrow canyon, Wallace seemed doomed to destruction.

Suddenly a sheet of flame, which appeared to be a hundred yards long, burst a hundred feet high into the sky, and it was only too apparent that the danger was graver than ever. Within a short time a brand from this lighted on a framed building and started the fire in town. The hills on the opposite side



*The Sunset Brewery building in Wallace, ID, following the Big Blowup of 1910. Photo: Courtesy of the Barnard-Stockbridge Collection (8-C04d), University of Idaho, Archives and Special Collections.*



*Destruction at the eastern end of Wallace, ID, following the Big Blowup of 1910. Photo: Courtesy of the Barnard-Stockbridge Collection (8-X0545d), University of Idaho, Archives and Special Collections.*

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The hills on the opposite side of the city then took fire, and on the south side the main hill was burning in 20 places.

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of the city then took fire, and on the south side the main hill was burning in 20 places. The residences on this hill took fire and were quickly demolished. It seemed as if the town could not be saved, but after several hours of valiant effort by the fire department, assisted by a large force of volunteers, the flames were stayed, and the damage is variously estimated at from \$500,000 to \$1,000,000, the actual figures being probably somewhere near \$800,000.

Among the destroyed buildings are the Coeur d'Alene Ironworks, Sunset Brewery, Coeur d'Alene Hardware Company's warehouse, Worstell Company's Furniture Store, O.R. & N. station, Corner and Fisher's office and warehouses,

Wallace Times, Wallace Cigar company, Turner Music Company, Pacific Hotel, Pacific Annex, several rooming houses and a large number of dwellings.

For a time it was feared the Providence Hospital and the Standard and Mammoth mills were destroyed, but they remained uninjured. The fire followed the hills to Mullan and Burke, and grave fears for both these towns were entertained. The damage will not be great in either place.

### No Panic

*In an editorial titled "Our Calamity," The Miner defended the town from the charge in a competing newspaper of a panicked reaction to the fire:*

While we regard this as no time for denunciation, we cannot refrain from criticising [sic] the *Spokesman-Review* for an article in its issue of Tuesday morning, which starts by saying 'we have passed the first stage of wild, unreasoning panic.' This was written by a special correspondent sent in here after the fire had been controlled and consequently ignorant of the circumstances. There was no panic, wild or otherwise, and never was more reason displayed in an emergency. Every able bodied [sic] man was active, going from one point of danger to another, to be of assistance to the best of his ability.

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